

Heritage NEWS



September 2012

Next General Meeting
Bill Kinley & Gary Cooper
regarding the restoration of the

FLOUR MILL

**7:30 p.m. Wednesday,
19 September**

@ The Ladies' Literary Club
218 N. Washington Street
The Public is invited

Signs of Our Times ...and Before

Highway travelers were familiar with the products of itinerant sign painters. Burma Shave, Swamp Root, and Mail Pouch Tobacco were among the nationally-known posters that found their way to Ypsilanti, but every town also had its local sign painters.

Their studios were splashed with paint and smelled of turpentine. Children liked to watch them lay down a line and sketch in their letters free-hand. Watching a painter apply a "drop shadow" was like seeing a classy magic act combined with superlative acrobatics.

These were the artisans who lettered the bank president's office door in gold leaf and helped the laundry lady decide what she wanted on her "shingle." Taxi and bus doors were lettered by hand, and every shop window held the result of the local sign painter's brushwork.

Many of Ypsilanti's commercial buildings were constructed of a porous brick that was intended to be painted even when new, so sign painters were often called in to "refresh" the work on street-facing walls.

Was it was the presence of the schools and colleges in this town that contributed to the fact that Ypsilanti was known for "best spellings" on their signs?



Flour Mill is focus of September program



Ypsilanti Archives 1888 photo



Phoenix Construction 2001 photo



Ypsilanti Archives 1889 photo

The Ainsworth Flour Mill at completion in 1888, decorated with signs in 1889, and rehabilitated in 2001

The Ainsworth Flour Mill was featured on a past Home Tour as a "landmark at the eastern gateway to the historic Michigan Avenue business district." Bill Kinley, owner of Phoenix Contractors, Inc., purchased the property in 2000 and spearheaded its redevelopment as a vibrant mixed-use property working closely with architect Gary Cooper of Cooper Design Associates to ensure the building's continued historic integrity.

The building was constructed in 1888 as the O. A. Ainsworth and Co. Feed Mill and Grain Storage at 514 and 516 Congress Street. Owner Oliver A. Ainsworth contracted the Detroit architectural firm of Mason & Rice to build the structure, which features striking Romanesque arches and a prominent roofline—both showing the influence of renowned architect Henry Hobson Richardson. Mason & Rice also designed the neighboring Ypsilanti Savings Bank (today the Ypsilanti City Hall) and Starkweather Chapel in Highland Cemetery.

The Ainsworth mill operated until about 1910. Since that time, the building has served as a feed and grain store, general store, lumber business, and numerous restaurants.

- From 2011 YHF Home Tour notes

The Flour Mill is a great example of the adaptive re-use of a unique historic structure. The 11,000 square foot building needed extensive work to create the dynamic space found here today. The original storefronts had been removed, all the original windows had been inappropriately replaced, the brick had been painted and poorly constructed additions had been added to the rear.

The renovated space is a wonderful mix of old and new, with exposed beams and brickwork. Arching windows grace the ground floor space and multiple skylights enhance the loft apartments upstairs. Due to the integrity of this renovation the project qualified for a federal Investment Tax Credit. - Phoenix Contractors, Inc.



**In the Sign Shop,
there's always something to do.
When the sign painter doesn't
have a job to do for somebody else,
he paints signs for himself . . .
...to show off his considerable skill:**



Sign painting is the act of taking a specific kind of brush, and with various kinds of paint, applying it to a 2- or 3-dimensional surface creating letters, forms and/or symbols. Sign painting is a learned craft with a long history within the realm of "artisans-crafts".

Historically, apprenticeships were the means of learning the craft though many, in the earlier history of the craft were self-taught. An apprenticeship could last for years, depending on the skill of the apprentice and the knowledge of the "master". The skills learned were varied and some were exceedingly complex.

Basically, learning to manipulate a lettering brush was the core of the learning process. This skill alone could take years to master. There were a number of associated skills and techniques also taught such as: gold leafing (surface and glass), carving (in various media), glue-glass chipping, stencilling, silk-screening.

With the advent of the computer and various kinds of software now available, the sign painting craft has been displaced with computer-driven sign-making machines. The "craft" has all but disappeared, and in only a few technical schools or specialty schools is the craft still taught.

Sign painters are usually self-taught and/or taught by mentors in the business. This is because sign painting is rarely offered in schools/universities, which in turn is the reason it could be considered a dying trade. However, most professional sign painters are quite passionate about their work and see today's computer-generated signs as both a blessing and a curse.



See more Graphic Sign Images in
"Vintage Commercial Art & Design"
by Frank H. Atkinson, Charles J.
Strong, and L.S. Strong, Dover Publi-
cations, Inc., Mineola, New York



Another MICHIGAN HISTORIC SITE registered in Ypsilanti



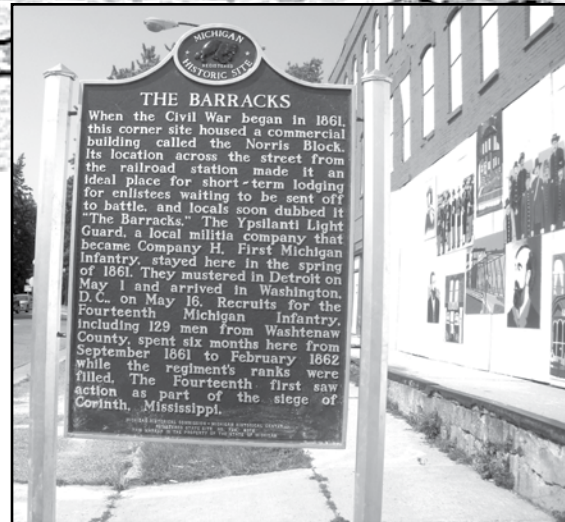
State marker installed on north-east corner of North River and East Cross

South Side of marker: THE BARRACKS

"When the Civil War began in 1861, this corner site housed a commercial building called the Norris Block. Its location across the street from the railroad station made it an ideal place for short-term lodging for enlistees waiting to be sent off to battle, and locals soon dubbed it "The Barracks." The Ypsilanti Light Guard, a local militia company that became Company H, First Michigan Infantry, stayed here in the spring of 1861. They mustered in Detroit on May 1 and arrived in Washington, D.C., on May 16. Recruits for the Fourteenth Michigan Infantry, including 129 men from Washtenaw County, spent six months here from September 1861 to February 1862 while the regiment's ranks were filled. The Fourteenth first saw action as part of the siege of Corinth, Mississippi"

North Side of marker: YPSILANTI IN THE CIVIL WAR

"More than 4,000 soldiers from Washtenaw County served during the Civil War. Hundreds bivouacked here, in the Norris Block, before mustering into service. More than thirty men who were students or graduates of The Michigan State Normal School (now Eastern Michigan University) joined Company E of the Seventeenth Michigan Infantry in 1862. Their first action was at South Mountain in Maryland. In December of 1863, the First Michigan Colored Infantry stopped here as part of its state-wide recruiting drive. In 1902 veterans of the Twenty-Seventh Michigan Infantry held their reunion here. Since the 1880s this site has been known as the Thompson Block and has had a variety of commercial uses."



The Michigan Historical Site Barracks/Civil War marker was installed in July 2012



John & Mary Delcamp report it was Company E. 17th Michigan Infantry who paid \$3,400 to the State of Michigan for the construction of the marker. Stuart Beal, owner of the Thompson Building, installed the marker at his expense.

The Thompson Building in 1905; before any City sign ordinance was in place

Over 3500 State Historic Sites in Michigan

- 96 in Washtenaw County
- 20 in Ypsilanti

How many Ypsi sites can you name?

See the list on page 5



New sign policies for Our Town

Ever since the psalmist wrote “Give me a sign...” (Psalms 86:17), the people have been asking for standards. City Council has updated their sign ethics for today’s world:

- No signs on the roof
- Window signs can take up 25% of a window - down from 30%
- Ground signs, sidewalk signs, “pup tents”, and “sandwich boards” are taboo

Temporary signs are still vexing:

- A city-issued 30-day permit is required and only two will be permitted a year
- Sidewalk signs limited to six square feet and made of weather-proof material
- Residential “for sale” signs are now limited to 12 square feet and must come down three days after fulfillment
- Construction signs are limited to 64 square feet and must be removed seven days after project’s finish

Neon window “outlines” are no longer permitted and even murals will require a permit and business murals must conform to steeper standards.

Prohibited signs:

- Abandoned signs
- Signs not specifically permitted under the ordinance
- Animated signs (no blinking, flashing, waving, pulsating, or undulating)
- Portable signs
- Signs containing obscene material

Businesses must now submit a “master sign plan” indicating size, location, lighting and other characteristics.

Old favorites survive the ordinance update

City Council has designated as “historic” some of our favorite signs in town and they won’t be included in the city’s updated sign ordinance.

Signs that have become part of our history include those found at:

- Haab’s, 18 W. Michigan Ave.
- Tap Room, 201 W. Michigan Ave.
- Rapid Shoe Fix, 115 Pearl St.
- Bull Durham Tobacco, 19 E. Cross St.
- Deja Vu marquee, 31 N. Washington St. (it’s not DejaVu that’s historic; it’s the marquee)
- Terry Bakery, 119 W. Michigan Ave.
- Trojan Dry Cleaner, 20 N. Adams St.
- Hudson sign at 100 E. Cross St.
- Peninsular Paper sign in Peninsular Park (the only example on the list that is not in the Ypsilanti Historic District)

SOURCE: “Ypsilanti City Council approves list of historic signs to be exempted from new sign ordinance”, Tom Perkins, AnnArbor.com, Friday, 7 October 2011

Photographer, Lynda Hummel, makes a record of Ypsilanti sign painters’ art for posterity





Editors' note: Without a budget like National Geographic, we regret we had to suck all the gorgeous color out of Hummel's work. More sensitive viewers can see these photos—and hundreds more—in their original qualities on Flickr: www.flickr.com/photos/eye-photog/sets.



Many of Hummel's works are available in calendar format at Standard Printing, 120 E. Cross Street.



Ballard House

125 N. Huron

Barracks/Civil War

R. River & E. Cross

Brinkerhoff-Becker House

601 W. Forest

Cleary College (info site)

2170 Washtenaw

William M. Davis House

(Ladies' Literary Club)

218 N. Washington

Eastern Michigan College

(info site)

College Place @ Forest

First Baptist Church

1110 W. Cross

First Methodist Episcopal Church

209 Washtenaw

First Presbyterian Church

300 N. Washington

Hutchinson House

600 N. River

Elijah McCoy

(commemorative site)

229 W. Michigan

MCRR Freighthouse

435 Market Place

Michigan Interurbans

(info site)

E. Michigan & N. Park

Prospect Park

Prospect @ E. Cross

Science & Manual Training Building (Scherzer Hall)

Putnam @ W. Forest

Starkweather Hall

901 W. Forest

Willow Run Bomber Plant

Tyler/Hudson @ US 12

Ypsilanti Area

(Ypsilanti Historical Museum)

220 N. Huron

Ypsilanti Historic District

Approximately

200 properties

Ypsilanti Water Works

Stand Pipe (water tower)

Cross @ Summit

“Billboard Bandits”: anti-sign vigilantes of the ‘70s

Newspaper headlines shouted “Billboard Bandits” every time a huge highway poster fell. News photographers scoured the sites of demolition and featured shots of cut-off poles and giant billboards crashed on some farmer’s corn-field alongside the major highways.

“Who’s cutting down our billboards?” they asked, and nobody ever figured out the answer. Forty years later, parts of the story can be told—but only a few parts.

It was the decade following the Summer of Love and of high-schoolers becoming aware of the damage being done to the environment. They picked up on broad national slogans for living a more ecological life and they wanted to do something dramatic about it. They were conservative in their use of commodity footprint, but they wanted to be radical in their perception of “returning to the earth.”

“Buzz” and “T.R.” attended every session of the school’s programs on saving the environment and often led the discussion about the “Bandits” who were cutting down billboards along Interstate 94 from Detroit to Jackson. Police figured the culprits must be from somewhere in the southeast Michigan area, but were unable to discover their identity. It seemed both the police and the general public liked the romantic sobriquet attached to the miscreants. The “Bandits” were heroes to some, but not to the advertisers and the companies that sold, created, and erected those billboards blocking the view of the landscape.

After an early spring lecture on inhibitions to the environment, “Buzz” and “T.R.” took their teacher to the upper-story classroom window overlooking the school’s parking lot. “Notice anything unusual out there?” they asked.

Not being terribly creative, the teacher counted the cars in the parking lot and assessed which were faculty-owned, which were students’. “No,” she said. “It looks like the same collection of old junkers that I see down there every day.”

“What about our van?” they hinted broadly, pointing out the Volkswagen micro-bus camper the boys had been living in for the past few weeks. “Notice anything unusual about that old V-dub? Does it always look like that to you?”

“Well, yes!” she responded. “It’s always dirty and I think that camping gear has always been there in the luggage rack.”

The boys chuckled knowingly. “Yep,” they said. “That’s the same junk we’ve been hauling around for the four years we’ve been in high school. It’s above eye-level. That’s where we keep our chain saws and other tools. You may have read about us in the papers.”

They confessed that they were, indeed, the “Billboard Bandits.” And then they went off to college in other states—and the billboards around Ypsi and Ann Arbor stopped falling.



Three generations: Seven members of the Short family at their S. Mansfield sign shop in Ypsilanti: dad, sons, and grandson, June 2012



A John Deere installation by Huron Signs



Construction at Huron Sign Company's S. Mansfield Street facility



In 2005, Huron Sign was recognized by the premier industry association, as one of the top designers in the field

Huron Sign Company is a high-quality establishment that has been serving its clients for over 45 years. They started out in the Millworks Building on N. River Street and have now expanded to a huge facility at 663 South Mansfield (past the UPS terminal at the end of the road, backing up to a good view from I-94).

Huron Signs is a full service company providing the unique combination of a highly experienced staff and a wide range of technologically advanced manufacturing equipment. As an added benefit they offer the ability to request services and installation online.

Although they are proud of their products, services, and technology, nothing matches the pride they have in their staff. They say they learned long ago that "we're really in the business of building relationships." For that reason, they have put a premium on hiring only the most qualified individuals to serve on their team of experts.

Huron Sign's staff is committed to providing excellent customer service and producing high-quality products and services. Heritage NEWS' editor had no trouble getting an interview with the Short brothers at their every-Saturday-morning-breakfast at The Bomber restaurant.

Consultation for a sign:

Customer: "What should I put on my sign?"

We're selling farm-fresh eggs."

Sign Painter: "How about, FOR SALE – TODAY – HERE – FARM FRESH EGGS?"

Customer: "How much would that cost?"

Sign Painter (pondering): "Well, you don't really need to say TODAY; of course it's today. You wouldn't put the sign out there if you didn't have any eggs right now. Same goes for HERE. It's extraneous; your sign is right in front of your driveway. And FRESH ought to be obvious. What's fresher than from right beside your chicken coop? And, for that matter, who needs FARM? It's all around you! Let's leave it out.

Customer: "So how much would it be to just say, EGGS? That ought to do it."

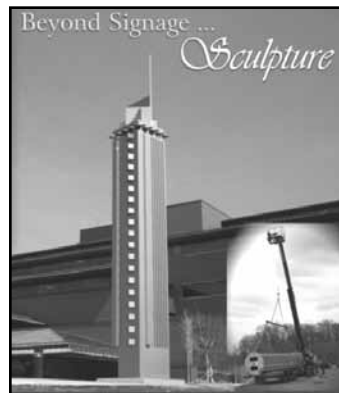
[A lesson for sign painters and journalists]



Signage goes up for Café Habana in downtown Ann Arbor



Installation at the Ann Arbor Auto Mall



The "Golden Beacon" at Domino's Farms

Huron Sign Company

663 South Mansfield

Ypsilanti, MI 48197

P.O. Box #980423

Ypsilanti, MI 48198-0423

800-783-0100

Fax: 734-483-5164

Installation photos on these pages came from Huron Sign Company's web page: customerservice@huronsign.com



The Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation

Heritage News

Claudia Pettit
945 Sheridan
Ypsilanti, MI 48197

Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation

Board Members

Hank Prebys, President
Joe Mattimoe, Treasurer
Jan Arps-Prundeanu
Tom Dodd
Pattie Harrington
Barry LaRue
Michael Newberry
Bill Nickels
Alex Pettit
Claudia Pettit
Don Randazzo
Jane Schmiedeke

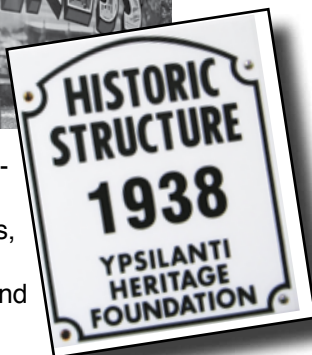
Dedicated to the belief that one of Ypsilanti's greatest resources is its historic architecture

See you at the General Meeting - Wednesday, 19 September, at 7:30 p.m.

Heritage News is the newsletter of the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation. It is published five times a year: September, November, January, March, and May; and distributed, free of charge to the membership by mail, and made available to the public at various business locations in the City.



"Give us a sign," they said, and 195 historical markers have been awarded by the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation to owners of homes, barns, and commercial buildings throughout the city. There are other plaques placed around town calling attention to our heritage, but the billboard that appeared on E. Michigan Ave. @ First St. this summer may be the largest marker yet calling attention to our history. Within each letter in the traditional postcard format is a clip of something historic in Ypsilanti: buildings, sculptures, churches, festivals, even chrome-plated hot rod engines. With Riverside Park for background, it's all there in a forty-foot poster touting Ypsi's long and colorful story.



2012/2013 SCHEDULE

Meetings are held at the Ladies' Literary Club,
218 N. Washington Street, Ypsilanti, at 7:30 p.m.
The public is welcome.

19 SEPTEMBER	Bill Kinley & Gary Cooper regarding restoration of the Ainsworth Mill
7 NOVEMBER	TBA
23 JANUARY	TBA
20 MARCH	TBA
22 MAY	Annual Marker Awards Banquet